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X.—THE AMELIORATION OF OUR SPELLING.

Let me first of all account for the title of this paper by quoting a few words from a recent editorial of the *New York Evening Post*:

"If time-worn phrases prevent a calm scrutiny of the facts, and a clear perception of the best fiscal policy for this nation . . . let us abandon them for some fresher and truer form of words. . . . Instead of taking free trade for a watchword, if that offends any, we may say that we stand for freer trade. Instead of talking about protecting American industry, let us talk about facilitating it."

The indications are that spelling reform is one of those time-worn phrases the use of which tends to prevent a calm scrutiny of the facts. It seems to excite in many minds on both sides of the ocean a psychical reaction which is unfavorable to sober discussion. It calls up images of a dear mother-tongue mutilated and made hideous by soulless vandals; of a demand that men and women who have once learned to read and spell shall acquire these useful arts over again. We hear talk of cranks, humbugs, etc. All of which is unfortunate, not because it hurts the feelings of reformers—for they can always ease their minds by reviling their opponents—but because it pulls the discussion into unprofitable channels and

tends to obscure the really important phase of the subject, namely, its educational phase.

Wishing, now, to charge upon this question boldly and yet circumspectly, I have thought best not to hang out the banner of "spelling reform," which is to many the red ensign of anarchy, but to substitute therefor a sort of pink flag of truce. Let us consider the amelioration of our spelling.

And first, a brief historical recapitulation. It was about a quarter of a century ago that the American Philological Association took up the large problem of improving our so-called English orthography. Having worked at it for ten years, in conjunction with the Philological Society of London, they adopted, in 1883, a joint report which recommended a set of rules for amended spelling and embodied a list of some 3500 words amended in accordance with the rules. In respect of the scholarly eminence of its promoters the movement could not have had a more distinguished and authoritative sanction. In 1892 our own Association passed a resolution recommending the rules and the word-list. In 1893 an account of the movement was incorporated in the Introduction to the new Standard Dictionary, and the amended words were printed as alternative spellings in their proper alphabetical position. A very few of them, especially such as had previously had some currency, have been adopted by certain journals. In general, however, so far as immediate and striking results are concerned, the movement appears, at this date, to have been futile. I say appears; for there is some evidence after all that the leaven is working. But the three associations have never printed their proceedings in the amended spelling—excepting the contributions of Prof. March—nor do their individual members use it in their books and other publications. There are of course good reasons for this, but it is not very surprising that many regard the movement as a pious counsel of perfection, which its very promoters do not take seriously.

More recently the educators have taken the matter up. In

1898 the directors of the National Educational Association passed a resolution, by a vote of eighteen to seventeen, authorizing the the secretary to adopt in the proceedings of the association such amended spellings as Commissioner Harris, and Superintendents Soldan and Balliet might agree upon. These three gentlemen selected, to bear the brunt of a preliminary skirmish, the twelve words: altho, catalog, decalog, demagog, pedagog, prolog, program, tho, thoro, thorofare, thru, thru-out. Since then these twelve words, in the amended form, have been used regularly in the official proceedings of the National Educational Association and have also been adopted by a number of educational journals, notably the *Educational Review*. The object of this little experiment was to put out a feeler; to familiarize a part of the public, especially teachers, with the idea that usage is another name for fashion, and that fashions do not grow out of the ground nor fall from heaven, but are created by some one's initiative. It should be noticed, however, that the twelve scouts were sent out by a very close vote. Dr. Harris has lately said that it would not surprise him to see the vote reversed at some future time—especially if too much fuss is made in public about the triumph of reform.

The last chapter in this brief chronicle takes us to the meeting of the Department of Superintendence of the National Educational Association, which was held at Chicago, in February, 1901. On that occasion a resolution was introduced by Mr. E. O. Vaile, an Illinois editor who has long been a spelling reformer, proposing the appointment of a National Commission of twenty, which should concern itself with the subject of spelling in its relation to education. The proposed commission was to be independent of the Educational Association, except for a financial subsidy, and to have complete discretion to go ahead in its own way. After a very animated debate the proposal of a national commission was indefinitely postponed by a vote of 105 to 77. How far this vote was a test of sheer hostility or indifference to the object ultimately

aimed at I do not know ; but it is reasonable to suppose that some of the adverse majority may have been actuated, in part at least, by doubt whether the proposed commission could accomplish anything worth while, and whether, in the present condition of public sentiment, the plan was a proper one for the Educational Association to take up and spend money on. At any rate the scheme was voted down.

So then, there we are ; and the prospect is bright or gloomy according to the view one takes as to the desirableness of improving our spelling at all, and the practicability of improving it through some kind of joint public effort. For myself I say frankly that if the matter concerned only the taste and convenience of adults, I should take but a feeble interest in it—an interest comparable to that I take in the attacks that are sometimes made on high hats and swallow-tail coats. One who has once learned to read and spell, who has acquired the fixed visual associations which, for better or worse, have become endeared to him, will always find it easier to go on as he has been going than to change his practice even in small particulars. And this is true not only of the hostiles and indifferents, but of those who are friendly to the idea of an improved spelling. It is easy to see why the distinguished scholars and men of letters who have enrolled themselves among the detesters of our conventional spelling nevertheless continue to employ it in their books. It is not merely cowardice, the dread of obloquy, of being called a crank ; there are always men enough who are willing to suffer in a good cause, but they need to be upborne by the conviction not only that the cause is good but also that they are accomplishing something worth while by the steps taken. Where this conviction is lacking, it is not to be wondered at that men, even men of good will, shrink from the inconvenience and the bother which attend any serious change of fixed habits. It is a trial to spell in accordance with the rules of the Philological Association. One who has not himself had a hand in drafting the rules must continually con-

sult his word-list to make sure that he is in harmony with a code which itself admits numerous inconsistencies and half-remedies and leaves a multitude of anomalies untouched. It is as if one were required to change any other habit that has become second nature ; as if one were required, for example, in walking, to pause at every tenth step and draw a deep breath. That might possibly be a good thing for a large part of our hurrying population ; but to induce one actually to do it, one needs not only a conviction that it would be a good thing but also a well-grounded hope that one's example will soon be widely followed and that one's personal contribution to the change will be worth the trouble that it costs.

And other considerations of course come in. One who writes for the public usually wishes before all things to establish cordial relations with his reader, that he may please him or convince him. He does not wish to divert attention to a side issue of spelling or to offend his reader by thrusting upon his eye bizarre-looking word-pictures to which he is not accustomed. Authors and publishers, who depend on popular favor for their reputation and their income, and to whom reputation and income are primary considerations, can not be expected to sacrifice the greater to the less.

These are commonplace reflections and I have set them down merely to bring into relief the simple thought that if this spelling question concerned the adult only, it would hardly be worth while to bother our heads about it seriously, or to attempt to counteract the overwhelming power of that conservatism which, unintelligently, irrationally, but all the more strongly for that very reason, attaches the English-speaking population to the familiar forms of our conventional printed language. We could leave the matter to the free play of the tendencies inherent in human nature, content to exert our individual influence quietly on behalf of common sense and sound reason, but with no particular anxiety for the future and with a cheerful confidence that our printed language, no less than the spoken, will always express the

character of the stock that uses it and be as good as that is. There would be no need to worry.

As it is, there *is* need to worry. For there is the question of teaching children to spell—a grave question, an ever-pressing question, which will not down when some one has said that his religious feeling is offended when he sees the word *Savior* printed without its British *u*. Tastes may differ as to the relative beauty and dignity of particular word-pictures, but the educational problem is not a matter of taste. It is not open to question among intelligent and fair-minded persons that a grievous burden is imposed upon childhood by the necessity of mastering, or attempting to master, the intricacies of our English spelling. Parents complain, editors, school-inspectors, college-examiners complain, and the higher teachers complain of the lower. Many have come to see that there is something somewhere seriously wrong; but only a few of the more enlightened have come to understand that the fault is not with the schools, and can not be corrected either by a return to the tools and methods of fifty years ago or by any devices of the newest new education; for it is inherent in that which Lord Lytton called, aptly enough, our accursed spelling.

Here is a condition which is no joke and will not relieve itself in the lapse of time. It cries aloud to us to do something if possible; to use our best wit and get together if we can, even if in the process we must abrade somewhat the sharp angles of personal prejudice.

How heavy is the burden as a matter of sober fact? To this question it is difficult to give a strictly scientific answer, because there is no perfectly satisfactory way of attacking the problem. Literature teems with estimates and computations of the time and money wasted in one way and another because of our peculiar spelling; but from the nature of the case they can only be roughly approximative. Speaking broadly, it appears that children receive more or less systematic instruction in spelling throughout the primary grades, that is for eight years. If now we suppose that they pursue on the

average five subjects simultaneously, and that spelling receives equal attention with the others, we get one and three-fifths years as the amount of solid school time devoted to this acquirement. This, however, does not tell the whole story ; for many begin the struggle before they enter school, many continue to need instruction in the high school and even in college, and not a few walk through life with an orthographic lameness which causes them to suffer in comfort and reputation. Probably two years and a half would be nearer the mark as a gross estimate of the average time consumed in learning to spell more or less accurately.

We have now to ask, How much of this time is wasted ? How much must we deduct for the reasonable requirements of the case ? Zealous reformers often assume that it is practically all wasted. They tell us that if we had a proper system of spelling, the acquisition of the art in childhood would take care of itself after a little elementary instruction. This may be so, but we have no means of proving positively that it is so. If any people in the world had an ideal system of spelling, we might go to them and find out how long it takes their children to learn spelling. But there is no such people ; and so we are forced back upon such rough and general statements—perfectly true in themselves—as that German and Italian children learn to spell much more easily and quickly than do our own children. Meanwhile, it is hardly fair to take as one term of comparison an ideal condition which never existed and never will exist. An alphabet must always be a rough instrument of practical convenience. Very certainly our posterity will never adopt any thorough-going system of phonetic spelling. Nothing is going to be changed *per saltum*. The most we can hope for is a gradual improvement, accelerated perhaps by wisely directed effort. This means that spelling will always have to be learned and taught, and that considerable time will have to be devoted to it.

On the other hand, keeping strictly within the limits of the practicable, in view of what other peoples no less conservative



than ourselves have actually done, I think it reasonable to calculate that we might save, not in a year or a decade, but in the lapse of two or three generations, say a half of the time now consumed in learning to spell. Certainly we might save a year ; and that is much when we consider the indefinite future of four score million people. Here is an argument in the presence of which the delicate emotions of the literary exquisite who is pained by a change of spelling do not seem to be prodigiously important.

And then it must be remembered that the loss of time constitutes by no means the whole of the indictment. Right at the threshold of school life, when the young mind is beginning to ask for the reasons of things, and when every principle of sound education requires that this propensity be developed and strengthened by appropriate stimuli and discipline,—just then we deluge the learner with an avalanche of irrationality. It is strictly true that the foolishness of our English spelling exerts a poisonous influence on our whole primary education. The mass of people, even of the educated, do not know this. Having themselves gone through the misery long ago, they look upon the struggle with spelling as a necessary evil of childhood—like chicken-pox and whooping-cough. We know,—scholars know who have an international scope of vision,—that it is *not* altogether necessary, any more than are the contagious diseases. A large part of the evil is remediable.

And now, perhaps some of my hearers are saying inwardly : We have heard all this before ; the only interesting question is, What do you propose to do about it? Well, I have a practical suggestion to offer, and the making of that suggestion is the real object of this paper. Before I come to that, however, I must spend a little more time on preliminary considerations.

The official attitude of this Association toward spelling reform is one of passive approbation. We have said to the reformers, *Maacte virtute*, but have declined to follow in their footsteps. I have already given reasons for this attitude, but

there is another reason which has no doubt all along been operating upon many minds besides my own. We have felt that it would be of comparatively little use to work on the minds of adults. Learned gentlemen who are already persuaded, or almost persuaded, may get together in associations and bombard each other with arguments and with documents in improved spelling, but this does little good. Some, perhaps, but not much. Nor does it avail much to support with an annual subscription the little organs which are published here and there by enterprising apostles of reform. All this is like the resolutions of a ladies' sewing society on the evils of man's addiction to alcoholic stimulants. It does not go to the right spot. Somehow or other you have got to work upon the minds of children during the plastic time when visual associations are giving rise to sentiment. And this has seemed hopeless because a requirement that children, who must in any event continue to learn the conventional spelling, be taught at the same time any considerable number of revised spellings—say those proposed by the Philological Association,—would result simply in increasing the burden that we wish to lighten. So there we are again; and it must have seemed to many that we are hopelessly entangled in the net of our evil inheritance.

This, however, is not quite so. Notwithstanding appearances to the contrary some progress has been made during the last quarter of a century, and I at least believe that still further and more rapid progress is possible hereafter, and possible by a process of evolution and natural selection, without any cataclysm more violent than that whereby we have got rid of the *k* in *music* and *traffic*. When I speak of progress I mean first of all that the intellectual battle, so far as there ever was any, has been completely won. The various arguments which used to be advanced by the supporters of the conventional spelling—by arguments I mean reasons based on knowledge, or the appearance of knowledge, and meant to convince the intellect of thinking men—have been

completely riddled to pieces. There is simply nothing left of them. The sematic argument from the supposed importance of distinguishing homonyms, the etymological argument, the historical argument, the literary argument, have all been passed in review by distinguished scholars and men of letters—men who by no twist of the imagination could be accused of indifference toward aught that is noble or precious in our inheritance—and have been shown to have little or nothing in them.

If anyone thinks that I am over-stating the case let him use his first leisure in calmly reviewing the discussion. Let him read what has been written by Max Müller, Murray, Whitney, Haldemann, March, Lounsbury and, more recently, by Brander Matthews. The opposition he will have to get mainly from the newspapers. When he has finished his review, he may still say that what is called spelling reform is foolishness or is an idle dream that can never be realized; but he will not be likely to say that the obstacle in the way is sound reason. What attaches us to our conventional spelling is not a body of convictions, but simply habit and feeling. A different habit would beget a different feeling. Our devotion may be compared with that of the wealthy Chinese to women with deformed feet. By habit his ideas of feminine loveliness and desirability are associated with that particular deformity. To him it is beautiful. *We* are under no illusions concerning *his* superstition, but call it a degrading bondage. We can see clearly that if he only *could* get rid of it somehow, it would be better all around. Our own case is quite similar.

But while the intellectual battle has been won the conservative sentiment remains about as strong as ever and will constitute, for a long time to come, an insuperable obstacle to all sweeping and schematic changes. That sentiment is non-rational in its origin and but slightly amenable to reason. It is of small use to attack it directly, or to attack the unsound arguments which it invents to justify its existence.

And the sentiment is in itself deserving of respect. If a man says that he loves the printed forms of English, just as they are, with all their imperfections, one can not blame him any more than for loving his wife or his country. All we can say is that his children will love their language just as well if they become accustomed to certain of its words in a form slightly different from those familiar to him. We are all creatures of feeling and habit rather more than of intelligence; nevertheless it is precisely the character of the rational, civilized man to wish to bring his feelings and habits into harmony with that which his reason approves as good.

What is needed is to prepare the way for a generation whose feelings shall be somewhat different from ours,—a generation that shall have less reverence than we have for what is called usage. During the last hundred and fifty years we have become a race of dictionary worshippers: and we have gone so far in our blind, unreasoning subserviency to an artificial standard that the time has come for a reaction. We need to reconquer and assert for ourselves something of that liberty which Shakspeare and Milton enjoyed. We need to claim the natural right of every living language to grow and change to suit the convenience of those who use it. This right belongs to the written language no less than to the spoken. We have the same right to make usage that Steele and Addison and Dr. Johnson had; and there is just as much merit in making usage as in following it. The tendency, or *Trieb*, which leads a people continually to refashion its inheritance is just as august, just as worthy of respect, as the conservative tendency. Indeed it is more worthy of respect; for it is the sign of a living language, and life is better than death.

There are signs that the reaction desiderated a moment ago is beginning. We seem to be entering upon an era of assertive individualism in this matter of spelling, and that is precisely what is needed. It is to be hoped that in the next few years variant spellings may continue to spring up in a

luxuriant crop and compete with one another for acceptance. It is to be hoped that good dictionaries may multiply, each claiming to be the best and each giving you a liberal choice for your money. Let editors and publishers show that they have a mind of their own and dare to use it—not to the extent of attempting radical and schematic reforms, but to the extent of trying experiments and adopting the more rational of competing forms. Let literary men be brought to see by an infinite series of slight shocks, that spelling was made for man, and that a change of spelling is no more an attack upon literature than an improved musical notation, if we could invent one, would be an assault upon music and an insult to the memory of Beethoven. In this way we shall gradually recover for our children's children the lost criterion of common sense.

Some one will say, perhaps, that this means chaos, confusion, the undoing of the work of the great and good Samuel Johnson. I reply : Yes, a little chaos will do us good. It is just the thing we need as a transition-stage toward a better regulation hereafter. No great interest of society is bound up with the use of a uniform spelling. So long as we keep within the limits of easy intelligibility it is no more important that we spell alike than that we pronounce alike or dress alike. We have always allowed ourselves some latitude in the spelling of particular words, and no damage has been done. Shakspeare had no Unabridged to consult and he spelt very much as the spirit moved him ; yet literature can hardly be said to have languished in his hands.

As a literary scholar I am not insensible to the advantages of a standard literary language. It is very convenient for printers and proof-readers, but it is not the life of literature. We have come to regard it as if it were, and many people imagine that our standard was created long ago by the poets and men of letters. Scholars know that this is not so ; that it was created rather by London printers, beginning with those of Caxton, who were Dutchmen unacquainted with English.

It is time for us to set deliberately about the reconquest of our liberties.

In matters pertaining to the spoken language I hold that the scholar will do his duty best if he lean somewhat heavily toward the side of conservatism ; for there the influences that make for rapid and often undesirable change are in the ascendent, and the scholar best knows what is noble and precious in our heritage. When we come to the written language, however, the case is entirely different. There the influences that make for conservatism are already strong enough and too strong ; and the scholar may wisely exert his influence for a gradual loosening of the tension of our orthographic superstition ; for he best knows how large a part of our standard is and was in the beginning fortuitous, capricious, absurd and based on pedantic blundering.

And now for my promised practical suggestion. I think that we need teachers' courses on the history of English spelling. I mean courses to be given in normal schools, high schools, colleges and universities,—wherever primary and secondary teachers are preparing for their work. If you please, we need a new style of spelling-book, one whose object should be to show the coming teachers of children just how we got into our present muddle. I would take the schoolmaster, or more properly the schoolma'am, by the hand and lead her up close to the idol that we have set up for worship under the name of USAGE. I would gently draw aside the wrappings and give her a glimpse of the sawdust and the cotton and the paint. I would call her attention to the glass beads that she has mistaken for diamonds and rubies.

The history of English spelling is a legitimate and dignified branch of scholarship, and if properly presented could be made of fascinating interest to prospective teachers. The book that I have in mind would be somewhat difficult to prepare, but not hopelessly so. It could almost be compiled from the extant writings of Prof. Lounsbury. It would be very simple and elementary. It would not presuppose a

knowledge of Anglo-Saxon, but it might make use of easy Anglo-Saxon illustrations. It would be strictly scientific; no partisanship, no spelling reform in it—at least none visible to the naked eye. The object of it would be simply to mediate between the scholar's knowledge and the minds of those who are to teach children. But you say, peradventure, What good would it do? The teacher who had learned all that could be learned in that way would still be obliged to teach the conventional spelling. Yes, but it would no longer be the same thing. She would do her work—occasionally at least—with a wild gleam of intelligence in her eye. Instead of a blind, unreasoning subserviency to a big book of mysterious and awful authority; instead of a dogmatic and categorical imperative, Thus shalt thou spell and not otherwise,—there would be little schoolroom discussions about the reason and the propriety of things; and that sort of thing, going on in many thousand places, would contribute to what I called a moment ago the recovery of the lost criterion of common sense. And occasionally something like this would happen: The teacher whose pupil had misspelled, say the word *foreign*, instead of reprimanding and marking him down, would say to him: "Well, Johnny, the fashion is to spell it *f-o-r-e-i-g-n*; but the *ig* got there by mistake, there is no reason why they should be there, and I think that if I were beginning life as you are, I should unload them." And Johnny would go out into life with a hundred orthographic "ideas" in his head; and in one way and another he would let them out upon the community—to the great advantage thereof.

To speak a little more seriously, my thought is this. When any inherited fashion or custom has become inconvenient and needs to be changed, but cannot be changed directly because of a superstitious reverence for tradition as such, the best way to prepare a change is to let in the light of knowledge upon its origin. At present, so far as spelling is concerned, this light shines only for scholars. We need to diffuse it throughout the community.

I commend this suggestion to our own English scholars and also to the National Education Association. Let the latter, instead of agitating for a national commission on spelling reform, which at the best could accomplish but little, call for and insist upon the instruction of primary and secondary teachers in the simple outlines of the history of English spelling. To that no one could reasonably object, since what it is proposed to teach is simply the truth, and is in itself worth knowing, if any history is worth knowing. It would work no sudden miracles, but it would lead gradually, and more speedily, I believe, than any other kind of effort, to the amelioration of our spelling.

CALVIN THOMAS.